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Late Middle English syntactic variation and change: towards an integrated model of accommodation in social networks*

1 Introduction

Weak is good: the spread of linguistic innovations and the ensuing change are supported by loose-knit social networks composed of mostly weak and uniplex ties, whereas change is retarded in strong social networks comprising mostly strong and multiplex ties (Milroy & Milroy 1985). For success, adjustment is vital: accommodation to target audience results in drawing on "the range of linguistic resources available in the speech community" (Bell 2001 : 145; Coupland et al. 1991) and hence in matching as closely as possible the assumed linguistic repertoire of the audience. In the following the reader is invited to reflect on an attempt that will be made to connect social network theory and communication accommodation theory in order to see whether this integrated model can better explain the mechanism of word order change stemming from the variation between V2 and V3 orders in Late Middle English main clauses with non-operator fronting. In general, it will be argued that the choice and the ensuing accommodation of the speaker will be constrained both by his and his audience's network position and by the nature of the link between them. In particular, it will be shown that the interrelated social network position of the author and the social network type of the target audience both influenced the rate of V2 in a convergent way in some of Geoffrey Chaucer's and John Capgrave's prose works. It will be shown that the way how this influence worked is best captured through the notion of weak-tied and strong-tied accommodation. The former type is accommodation towards innovative forms and results in language change while the latter one also results in modifying one's language but not in language change proper.

Through connecting social network position with accommodation phenomena and incorporating it in the variationist account of language change (cf. Kroch 1989, 2001; Kroch & Taylor 1997), a finer approximation to the causes and the trajectory of changes can be achieved. This is all the more important as the fluctuation in the rate of V2 and V3 was previously thought to depend mainly on audience type

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once the evident influence of dialect, sociolect, genre, copying and translation is eliminated (Eitler forthcoming).

The proposed integrated model, elaborated on in **§3**, will be verified through presenting two case studies in **§4**, both of which address the competition between the word order variants V2 and V3 in the environment of main clause non-operator fronting (as defined by Haeberli 2000). At first, however, the following section provides an overview of social networks.

2 Social networks and language change

As linguistic innovations must have a medium to be able to spread either from one generation to another in the process of language acquisition or among contemporaries in the process of communication between interlocutors in speech situations, this medium has to be defined first and foremost. The medium in the case of natural languages is a link that can exist between two humans only. This link is implicationally possible between any two humans that can ever have any opportunity to use this link. Furthermore, this pre-existing link, which can be used for communication transmission, must be able to be activated whenever the need emerges. This link can be characterised as a line having two endpoints, a simple graph (see Figure 1). As empirically there are more humans than two in a society, there are more links within a given society. Within a language community that equals a society, the innovations which fossilise into changes will do so by spreading to such an amount of people, the critical mass, that will make these innovations acceptable simply by their mass. Thus spread presupposes more than two humans and one link in between. Links and points together form networks which are dubbed social when speaking about humans. Social networks have specific typology and topology, which is based on the character of the comprising links.

The links can be classified on the basis of the number of dimensions along which two individuals can be linked to each other. If they are linked in many ways, e.g., they are relatives, work at the same place, live in the same town, both frequent the same local pub, both belong to the same fan club, etc, this link will be a multiplex one (Figure 2). A uniplex link (Figure 1), on the other hand, is one that has only one dimension through which the two interlinked individuals relate to each other.

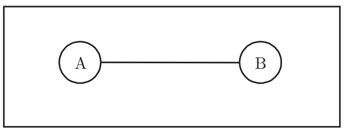

Figure 1: A uniplex link

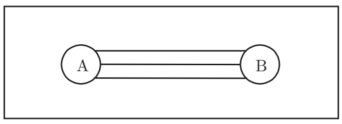

Figure 2: A multiplex link

The number of links within a given network can be large, in which case one can speak about a dense network, whereas a network with a small number of links can be dubbed as a loose one.

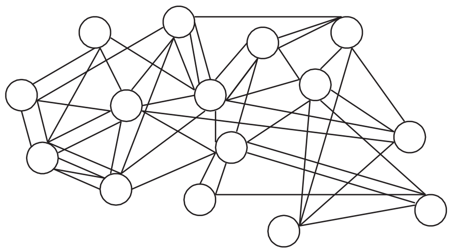

Figure 3: A close-knit or strong-tied network

Loose networks, comprising mostly weak, uniplex ties, can be referred to as weak networks, whereas networks mostly comprising multiplex links are accordingly dubbed strong networks. Network strength naturally also depends on the number of strong links: accordingly, networks can be close-knit (with many strong ties, causing density, cf. Figure 3) or loose-knit (with many weak ties, cf. Figure 4).

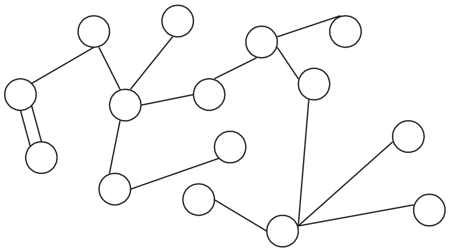

Figure 4: A loose-knit or weak-tied network

It was shown in numerous studies (Allen 1997; Milroy 1992) that strong social networks support linguistic stability and thus they are resistant to emerging innovations. The changes that were about to spread are usually reversed. Weak social networks, however, were shown to support the spread of innovations.

Involving competing conservative and innovative forms, variation is always present in a language (Allen 1997). It will lead to change only when the social conditions within the language community allow for the transmission process. In stable social conditions, characterised by strong networks, there will be fewer changes than in volatile social conditions, characterised by weak networks.

Next, it is worth considering the various positions within a social network as this will furnish us with more insight as to how the spread of innovations is accomplished. An idealtypical social network (Figure 5, overleaf) has both central and peripheral positions. Due to his position, a centrally located individual will have more links to other individuals than a peripherally located one. The former one will have higher social status and will have more multiplex ties due to its higher social status and hence social obligations. On the other hand, a peripheral individual will have a small number of low-intensity links to other social groups organised into social networks of their own. As this peripheral individual will have

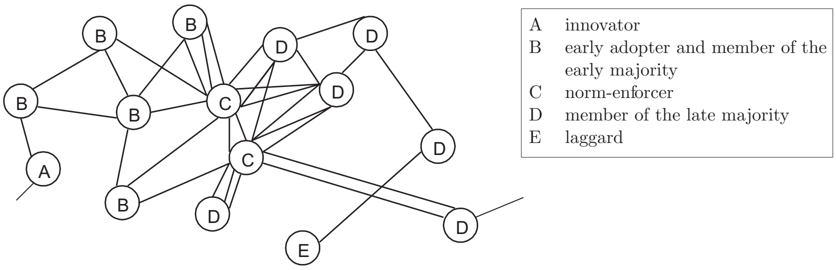

Figure 5: An idealtypical social network
and the diffusion of innovations (from A to E)

lower social status in any groups between which he commutes, the ties that he will have will be uniplex, as the only characteristic dimension of these ties will be location and not intense social activities.

When innovations travel through networks (see Figure 5), it is the peripheral individuals that will have the position to induce the spread of the innovation. As these individuals will have weak and long internetwork ties that support the internetwork spread, and as they are not bound by any norms, they will also feature as the innovators. Creativity stems from social freedom. The more central individuals will be more prone to follow the norms but still try out the new linguistic forms. These people are called early adopters and the early majority because they adopt the innovations still at an early stage of the transmission process. The most centrally located individuals will not only be prone to follow norms but also the ones who will enforce these norms and who have great prestige coming from their social status. Their interest therefore lies in maintaining, conserving the prevalent norms as it is only in this way that they can maintain their social position. These conservative individuals are referred to as norm-enforcers. It is them that an innovation reaches at a relatively late stage of the transmission. If they accept an innovation, the change can run its course. When a change is accepted by the norm-enforcers, the late majority, composed of the late followers, start using it. Finally, there will always be highly conservative individuals, the so called laggards, who will resist the change, usually successfully, which results in residual forms often referred to as irregularities.

3 Towards an integrated model of accommodation in social networks

Besides the social network structure, the integrated model, elaborated on in this paper, has to incorporate the further dimension of audience design and communication accommodation theory in more detail. In order for a change to take place, a group of receptive decoders is needed. This group is usually called the audience. According to the communication accommodation theory, in a communication situation the interaction between interlocutors can be more successful if they *inter alia* accommodate to each other linguistically. In the case of persuasive discourse, the need to convince and influence the target audience can be an even stronger driving force resulting in the encoder's switching to the listener's language, which idiom naturally has to be part of the encoder's competence or linguistic repertoire, too.

The diffusion of innovations implies an audience who either accepts or rejects those innovations, and according to whose decision the trajectory of the diffusion is shaped constantly. As the innovation travels both within and between networks of people, the respective audience can be of many kind. The audience mostly varies according to the status of the interlocutors within the network.

If the encoder is the innovator, the receptive audience can be minimum one early adopter, whereas the refusing audience can be any network member disfavouring changes. Refusal of an innovation can happen at every stage of the diffusion on the part of the late majority or the laggards. If the innovation is accepted by the early adopter, he will be the encoder who passes on this innnovation to other early adopters. From the group of early adopters and the early majority, the innovation spreads through the norm enforcers, the critical point, to the members of the late majority. The interlocutors finally participating in the change are the members of the late majority and the laggards.

For every member of the aforementioned types of audience the question is to accept or not to accept the innovation. This simple decision, however, depends on at least two major factors:[1] (1) the behaviour pattern of the decoder, i.e., the audience and (2) the relationship of the interlocutors. In this model it is assumed that the behaviour pattern of the encoder is invariably predestined and hence not taken into consideration: he attempts to accommodate and spread the change to as many decoders as possible. As has been shown above, the behaviour of the decoder correlates with his network status, whereas the relationship of the interlocutors depends not only on their network status but also on the strategy applied by the encoder to make his audience accept the innovation. Among others, his strategy is based on his expectations, presuppositions and previous knowledge.

The only viable strategy for an encoder to successfully transmit the innovation is to accommodate to his audience. It could be presumed that the less he accommodates to his audience, the less likely his audience will accommodate and hence accept the offered innovations. Now it could be asked how changes are possible at all if it is only the encoder (e.g., the innovator) that accommodates to his audience who does not use the innovation. How can it ever happen that some decoders from the audience still accept the innovation?

More factors here work towards acceptance. First and foremost, accommodation must be regarded as a two-way process in which the audience also accommodates actively. It will use the encoder's innovative forms in order to give positive feedback as it also needs to convince the other party about its goodwill in order to make him accept its point of view. This means that both interlocutors have interest in approximating their usage as both of them vie for social success (Keller 1994) through successful communication. Secondly, due to the network structure, the audience is more likely to be receptive: e.g., on encountering an innovation, the early adopter's behaviour is receptive (relatively more receptive than that of

[1] The issue of how to accommodate in the present model the equally essential aspects of speaker design, social stratification and spatial organisation within social networks is planned to be addressed in future research.

the norm-enforcers, late majority or laggards). This pairwise relativity of receptive susceptibility explains the gradual spread of innovations between individuals representing an ever higher position on the cline of conservativeness. Thirdly, based on his previous knowledge, presuppositions and his subconscious, the encoder will never fully accommodate to the audience, probably to maintain the integrity of his identity (a speaker design phenomenon). Fourthly, because of the diversity of the language, apparent in the numerous dialects and sociolects, the encoder will never be able to accommodate fully to the language of all of his audiences with whom he is likely to interact within his speech community. It can be concluded that innovations spread as accommodation is a two-way process, serving the interests of both the encoders and the decoders.

Nevalainen and Raumolin-Brunberg's (2003) model suggests that interlocutors are likely to accommodate to each other in a weak-tie contact situation, which leads to language change. However, it cannot be ignored that accommodation also occurs when there is no ensuing language change. It can be argued that this latter type of accommodation occurs in strong-tie contact situation. Here the otherwise pro-innovation encoder — who vies for successful communication e.g., with a conservative norm-enforcer decoder, and whose linguistic repertoire may contain innovative forms besides the conservative ones—draws on the resources of his speech community and accommodates to the conservative forms used and enforced by the decoder. It has already been shown that accommodation is a two-way process in that both encoders and decoders modify their language; now it can be added that accommodation always takes place irrespective of the social network type. Importantly, it is the direction of the accommodation towards innovative or conservative forms that determines the usage of certain innovative and conservative forms, and this direction depends on the relative position and the derived relationship of the mutually accommodating interlocutors within the social network. In case of a strong link between interlocutors, the encoder will more probably accommodate to the conservative forms or, to be more precise, the already existing forms of the decoder, in order to maintain their relationship. In case of a weaker link, however, there is no such driving force. Here the communication strategy is rather to support the exchange of information or assistance and thus accommodation to the conservative forms on either side is not so essential, resulting in enhanced accommodation to innovative forms apparent in an increase in usage frequencies.

The present model, derived and modified from that of Nevalainen & Raumolin-Brunberg (2003), will therefore predict that weak-tied accommodation is towards innovative forms and results in language change. Strong-tied accommodation will predictably also result in modifying one's language but not in the advancement of language change, rather in the reversal of a change. This kind of accommodation happens in order to match typically conservative forms of indigenous dialectal and vernacular intrafamily origin. This concept of strong-tied accommodation is compatible with previous synchronic sociolinguistic accounts of how norm-enforcers and strong ties, through their preserving function, disfavour linguistic innovations.

4 Social network and accommodation in Late Middle English: two case studies

4.1 Research design

It was thought that testing and verifying the above proposed model would be best done through providing case studies. Two research questions can be formulated. (1) Is there any evidence suggesting that the considerably divergent variational character of some prose works of Geoffrey Chaucer and John Capgrave, showing a fluctuating rate of usage frequency of the competing word order variants V2 and V3 in main clauses with non-operator fronting, correlates with the interactive accommodation between and the social network position of the interlocutors? (2) Can the divergent variational character of the chosen texts be due to strong-tied and weak-tied accommodation, respectively?

For the purpose, four texts were chosen for minute examination: two by Geoffrey Chaucer and two by John Capgrave. The choice fell on these two authors as (1) both of them translated from Latin, a non-V2 language, (2) both of them produced non-literary prose works, (3) their texts can be dated and their authorship can be determined with certainty (see also Eitler forthcoming), and (4) the families of both authors originated from East Anglia, where the indigenous, though Scandinavian contact-induced word order was of the CP-V2 type, hence both of them had CP-V2 as their indigenous basis to deviate from (Eitler forthcoming).

Geoffrey Chaucer is primarily represented by his *Treatise on the Astrolabe* (hereafter *Astrolabe*) and *The Equatorie of the Planetis* (hereafter *Equatorie*). For comparison, data were drawn from Haeberli (2000), who besides the *Astrolabe* examined three literary prose works as well: *Boethius* and two prose tales from the *Canterbury Tales*, *The Tale of Melibee* and *The Parson's Tale*. As Haeberli (2000) provided only conflated data for Chaucer (reproduced in data row 3 in Table 1), the aggregated word order usage frequencies in Chaucer's prose literary works (in data row 4 in Table 1) were arrived at by deducing the number of V2 and V3 clauses in the *Astrolabe* from Haeberli's respective figure of V2 and V3 clauses for his Chaucer corpus. John Capgrave is represented by his *Sermon* and his *Abbreuiacion of Cronicles* (hereafter *Chronicle*), from which data were drawn from Haeberli (2000) and from a previous investigation (Eitler 1999).[2]

4.2 Geoffrey Chaucer

Table 1 shows that, in the *Astrolabe*, in main clauses containing a nominal subject the rate of V2 is 88.4 percent, whereas in main clauses with a pronominal subject the rate of V2 is slightly lower, 83.1 percent. This almost systematic pronominal V2, however, can be regarded as a sufficient diagnostic of the presence of a CP-V2 syntax, somewhat distorted by the intrusion of a clearly V3 syntax. The *Equatorie* exhibits a completely systematic V2 syntax, which is clearly a CP-V2 one. In the literary prose texts, on the other hand, the rate of V3 is 69–70 percent.

[2] During the research the second version of the computerised Penn–Helsinki Parsed Corpus of Middle English (PPCME) was used, which is a morphologically tagged and syntactically parsed collection of Middle English texts (Kroch & Taylor 2000).

Texts	Nominal subject				Pronominal subject			
	V2	Rate of V2	V3	Rate of V3	V2	Rate of V2	V3	Rate of V3
Treatise on the Astrolabe	38	88.4%	5	11.6%	59	83.1%	12	16.9%
Equatorie of the Planetis	7	100%	0	0%	19	95%	1	5%
Chaucer's prose works in PPCME-1 (conflated in Haeberli 2000)	64	50%	64	50%	95	50%	95	50%
Chaucer's literary prose works in PPCME-1 (after deduction)	26	31%	59	69%	36	30%	83	70%

Table 1: Word order usage frequencies in Geoffrey Chaucer

It can be claimed that Chaucer had syntactic diglossia with two competing parameter settings, a systematic CP-V2 and a V3, and some of his works have a higher rate of V2 (*Astrolabe* and *Equatorie*), whereas some others (*Prose Tale of Melibee*, *Parson's Tale*) have a higher rate of V3.

The influence of the target audience and the bidirectional accommodation can be detected in Chaucer. It is known from the preface to the *Astrolabe* that Chaucer intended this instructive text for the use of one of his children. The *Equatorie* is a natural complement to the *Astrolabe* (cf. Price 1955; Rand Schmidt 1993; corroborated by Eitler forthcoming), and hence it can be claimed that it too was written for the use of his son. According to Eitler (forthcoming), in these two texts Chaucer used his indigenous syntax, which was of the CP-V2 type. By contrast, in the prose texts of the imaginative narration type (as evidenced in row 4 in Table 1) Chaucer substituted his systematic CP-V2 syntax with a mixture of V3 and CP-V2 syntax (Eitler forthcoming). These texts targeted a nationwide audience who had a stronger V3 syntax, which was characteristic of the emerging supraregional standard.

As the influence of scribal interference and translation can be eliminated, the dichotomy apparent in this fluctuation can be explained by the integrated model of accommodation in social networks, advanced in **§3**. Strong-tied accommodation can be found in the case of the *Equatorie* and the *Astrolabe*, in which works, due to the family type of audience, accommodation resulted in the increased, almost systematic usage of the family's indigenous and otherwise conservative V2 order. On the other hand, weak-tied accommodation can be observed in Chaucer's literary works, in which, due to the the nationwide audience, accommodation resulted in the increased usage of the innovative variant V3 of the nationwide emerging standard.

4.3 John Capgrave

As can be seen in Table 2, in Capgrave's *Sermon*, V2 is systematic in main clauses containing a nominal subject, whereas in main clauses with a pronominal subject the rate of V2 is 90.9 percent. These figures indicate the presence of a systematic CP-V2 syntax into which a V3 syntax has slightly intruded. According to Haeberli's (2000) data, in the *Chronicle*, in main clauses with a nominal subject, the rate of V2 is 40 percent, whereas in main clauses with a pronominal subject the rate of V2 is higher, 51.7 percent. According to the data based on a search on a 100-clause extract (Eitler 1999), provided here for comparison, the *Chronicle* exhibits 47.3 percent V2 in main clauses with a nominal subject, and 42.8 percent V2 with a pronominal subject.

Texts	Nominal subject				Pronominal subject			
	V2	Rate of V2	V3	Rate of V3	V2	Rate of V2	V3	Rate of V3
Sermon	4	100%	0	0%	10	90.9%	1	9.1%
Abbreuiacion of Cronicles (Haeberli 2000)	36	40%	54	60%	31	51.7%	29	48.3%
Abbreuiacion of Cronicles (Eitler 1999)	9	47.3%	10	52.7%	3	42.8%	4	57.2%

Table 2: Word order usage frequencies in John Capgrave

It can be argued that as a rule sermons are preached to a local community. In Capgrave's case it was a local community in Cambridge that the *Sermon* was intended for. As the target audience is a local one, one can expect more locally used and accepted forms to occur in the text and so the rate of the V2 variant to be higher, which is the case in this work. In a chronicle, however, the eminent aim of the encoder is mainly to inform the readers that constitute a wider audience possibly recruited from all over the country. It can be argued that in this case the encoder is not compelled to use any linguistic forms preferred in a specific dialect area. Instead, he can opt for more widespread forms that are understandable in larger areas. A candidate type of a language having these forms could be the colourless regional standard, understandable *inter alia* beyond East Anglia, or the then emerging supraregional standard, both of which can be claimed to have had a lower rate of the conservative variant V2 (Eitler forthcoming). As seen above, it is exactly this lower rate that is found in the *Chronicle*.

To sum up, the dichotomy in John Capgrave can also be explained through the proposed integrated model of accommodation in social networks. Accordingly, strong-tied accommodation can be observed in his *Sermon*, in which, due to the influence of the local Cambridge folk, accommodation resulted in the increased, almost systematic usage of the local dialectal and otherwise conservative V2 variant. On the other hand, weak-tied accommodation can be found in Capgrave's *Chronicle*, in which, due to the nationwide audience, accommodation resulted in the increased usage of the innovative variant V3 of either the colourless regional or the nationwide emerging standard.

5 Conclusion

It has been found that the divergent variational character of the examined prose works of Geoffrey Chaucer and John Capgrave is evident in the fluctuating rate of usage frequency of the competing word order variants CP-V2 and V3 in main clauses with non-operator fronting. It was claimed that this variational phenomenon is due to the interactive accommodation between, and the social network position of, the interlocutors. It has been found that both authors accommodated to the language of the target audience: they used the conservative variant V2 to a larger extent when addressing either a local or a familiar audience with the conservative variant in their vernacular, whereas they used the innovative variant V3 when targeting a wider audience who presumably spoke dialects or the emerging standard having the innovative variant.

It can be concluded that the shift in the word order use of Chaucer and Capgrave is primarily audience-designed. This means that although the innovative and the conservative variants were drawn from the pool of respective dialectal, sociolectal and stylistic variants available in the authors and the speech community, the choice was not dialectally or stylistically induced but directly depended on the audience which only happened to prefer the variant already indigenous in their dialect and sociolect or typical of the given genre.

Modifying the model advanced in Nevalainen & Raumolin-Brunberg (2003), a distinction between strong-tied and weak-tied accommodation was made. Next, the findings for Chaucer and Capgrave verified that weak-tied accommodation is towards innovative forms and results in language change while strong-tied accommodation also results in modifying one's language. However, this latter happens in order to match typically conservative forms of indigenous dialectal and vernacular intrafamily origin. The fact that strong-tied accommodation does not yield language change complies with sociolinguistic accounts of how norm-enforcers (in our case: a local community) and strong (in our case: family) ties manage to block linguistic innovations.

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